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ORAL ENGLISH

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In the early days of our work in the teaching of oral compositions in Springfield, 'one of the most rigorous fights we had to wage was against illiteracy. A real problem confronted us when we found that our pupils, in their desire to speak grammatically, were paralyzed with self-consciousness or were in the habit of using those expressions that please the ear of the conscientious purist of doubtful education. After studying the various possible methods of handling the difficulty, we evolved a plan which has proved to be of great practical value. The work is almost entirely oral and concerns itself with those blunders in speech that are most common and most persistent. Sentences containing troublesome constructions are repeated orally many times in school and at home in order that the ear may become accustomed to the new sound of *That's not they; I should like to be he; I wanted the president to be him*, or what not. When we are reasonably sure that the pupils are no longer startled by the sound of the correct forms, we deduce the rules with them. After at least ten demons of speech have been attacked in this manner, we shut down the machinery of the school and give a rapid-fire examination. The section-room teacher dictates as fast as he would ordinarily talk and the pupil writes only the critical part of the sentence, making his choice as to the correct form. Thus there is no time in which to reason out rules. Every one must depend upon his ear and this he can do if he has been faithful to the oral drill. Soon

after the examination, the results are tabulated according to classes — freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior — and are read in the assembly hall. The students are as interested in the announcements of the results as in the report of a game. Five times during the year, the whole school is examined in this fashion. At the end of the series, the class receiving the highest average is awarded a picture for its home room, and great is the enthusiasm in the assembly hall when the president receives the trophy on behalf of his victorious class.

Such a method of handling the common errors in every day speech has two advantages. All the teachers of the school are brought into the examining work and are thus made aware of the mistakes which are undergoing the process of extermination and the entire student body is fighting the same solecisms at the same time. Teachers of shop work and mechanical subjects are continually asking for old examinations in order that they may keep up with the current drill work; and the pupils who find the examinations difficult are tutored from time to time by the honor students in English. Every one gets into the campaign because every one believes in the value of the work.

But in the oral grammar drills are valuable not only in correcting the conversational English heard in and out of school; they have a distinct bearing upon the elimination of errors in grammatical structure in the more formal exercises in oral composition. Every teacher has, some time or other, hesitated to interrupt a spirited oral composition in order to correct a grammatical blunder. Such constant daily oral drill as I have just described tends to reduce to a minimum the necessity for struggling with many of the common obstacles to effective public speaking.

The second aid, oral reading, is a definite, natural approach to the teaching of oral composition. For the self-conscious youth, it has less terror than the formal oral composition. He may have to stand in front of the class and he should stimulate interest by bringing into play all the devices known to the production of effective speaking, but he can depend upon his book and he has the consolation that he is not responsible for what he is reading. To the nervous, self-centered child this means much.

For the pupil who is mentally sluggish, oral reading often acts as a stimulant. He becomes interested in a scene that he has been reading and he is willing to let his teacher stir

him a bit so that he can get the passage over to the other members of his class. Once moved to action in this way, he becomes more susceptible to similar exercises and finally bestirs himself to enter into other oral activities. But for all children, an oral reading exercise serves as a very profitable introduction to a lesson in oral composition. My own experience has taught me that the passages read should be similar in form and in spirit to the assignment in oral composition which is to follow. For instance, if by Friday I wish to have a series of oral compositions dealing with exciting moments at a fire, I have various pupils prepare oral readings from such writers as Lytton, Dickens, Lafcadio Hearn, and Jacob Riis, all of whom have written vividly of small fires or great conflagrations. But in using literary selections as models for oral composition it is not enough to call attention to the qualities of style that have made these selections clear, vivid, and impressive. The teacher must see to it that, through the oral reading, the interpretation is so convincing as to induce the pupil to carry over into his own oral composition the same intensity of feeling, the same vitality of expression.

Oral reading, like oral grammar, should be prepared at home. The teacher should give preliminary questions and directions to the pupil which should stimulate interest in the subject matter of the passage and in the practice reading. For instance, the following questions, applied to each person speaking, might be helpful in the reading of dialogue. What kind of person is speaking? What mood is he in? Does his mood change? What tone of voice should you use in rendering each of these moods? What emotion is expressed in each of the sentences followed by an exclamation point? Practice, orally, the reading of these sentences to reveal this kind of emotion. What sentences are used to ask questions but are not in question form?

The third aid, declamation, is even a step closer to oral composition than is oral reading. The book is dispensed with and the pupil has to remember both subject matter and delivery. The model that he commits should be of vital interest to him, it should be worthy of imitation, and it should be short. It should possess, moreover, those characteristics that are suited to the interpretative power of a pupil of high school age. In preparing such memory passages, the pupil should first visualize thoroughly and then practice with preliminary questions similar to those sug-

gested under oral reading. Here are a few which might be used in giving such a selection as, the chariot race from *Ben Hur*. What is the mood of the passage? Is there any change? Where? With what kind of feeling should the questions be asked? How must the part expressing speed be rendered? What words convey this impression? How should they be spoken? How should the short sentences be delivered so as to give the effect of speed and not of choppiness? Of course it is not enough for the pupil to answer these questions. He must practice *aloud*, many times, the passage, keeping in mind the questions as he works. This exercise might well be engaged in before the pupils are asked to speak upon such a subject as *An Automobile Race at the Eastern States Exposition*, or a *Horse Race at a County Fair*. To have the greatest practical value in the teaching of oral composition, every declamation should prepare the way, as in this instance, for a definite exercise which will bring into play the pupil's original expression of a similar experience. As in oral reading, the teacher must see to it that the material used for analysis and speaking kindles the imagination and feeling of the pupil to the extent that he is stimulated to express his own experiences in a sincere manner.

"It needs the overflow of heart,
To give the lips full speech."

But this sincerity should be most keenly felt and most naturally displayed, after much preliminary work in oral reading and declamation, in the expression of the pupil's own ideas.

Oral composition, that phase of oral English which is most engaging the attention of the teachers today, can be considered profitably under two heads: first, oral composition in school; second, oral composition in the English activities of student life outside the recitation period.

Oral composition in school obviously has as its center of activity the English recitation room. Here it is that students learn how to speak by helping the teacher dissect, analyze, and synthesize what they have to say. Fortunate indeed is the child that finds himself in a room characterized by an atmosphere of kindly, helpful criticism. The homely old saying, "Nothing succeeds like success" is especially true of pupil-endeavor in oral expression. No student, therefore, who has really tried should be allowed to feel the sting of failure.

"We are much bound to them that do succeed;
But in a more pathetic sense, we are bound
To such as fail"

From my own experience, I feel it is wise to begin a lesson in oral composition by having some pupil set a standard. I call upon a spirited lad who, I am reasonably sure, will do a forceful piece of work. He sets the pace, and somehow his confidence and his success seem to give confidence and success to the diffident. So convinced am I of the importance of setting a high standard at the beginning of the year that I rarely call upon any pupil for a sustained effort until I have discovered, through class discussion, who are likely to be the leaders in the oral work. Then I confine my attention to them during the greater part of the first quarter. When oral composition has become an old story, when an atmosphere of helpfulness and success has been established, I call upon the less gifted pupils, taking care to suit the subjects to their ability. I have found it also to be of great advantage, during the first months of the school year, to restrict the subject for treatment to single paragraphs. If the theme is expository or descriptive in purpose, the pupil is instructed to begin his work with a topic sentence which will be definite enough so that his hearers may follow carefully the growth of the paragraph idea. After the theme has been delivered, the pupils criticize for smoothness of expression, choice of words, variety of sentence structure, voice variation, social interest, and the like. It must be remembered, however, that the composition thus criticized has been prepared and practiced orally at home.

It is, however, in the oral work connected with the club life of the pupils of the Technical High School that I find the painstaking class room work bearing its most fruitful results. In such English activities there is all the striving for form and finish associated with the recitation work, but the expression is freer and more social in its nature. This socialized English activity, I wish to discuss in more or less detail as it is seldom, if ever, treated in the educational journals of the day. This subject, as it is developed in our school, has followed three distinct lines: (1) After-dinner Speaking; (2) Story-telling; (3) Dramatics.

I am sure that all of us, at some time or other, have listened to speeches given after a dinner tendered to a successful football squad, and have heard the brawny heroes respond to the enthusiasm of their admirers in language some-

thing like the following:—"Thank you fellows. You fellows don't know how much it meant to us to have you out on the field today. Thank you. Thank you, fellows, we—I—we—we all thank you for this hearty expression of school spirit. Thanks awfully much, for it means much to us all."

With memories of attempts similar to the one I have just sketched still fresh in my mind, I decided, at the beginning of the last school year, to teach the principles of after-dinner speaking in the Forum, our junior-senior literary club for boys.

The study divided itself naturally into (1) analytical work based on a careful study of models, (2) creative work. During the fall and winter months, the boys met regularly in the school library, to analyze some of the famous after-dinner speeches of Simeon Ford, Hamilton Wright Mabie, Chauncey M. Depew, Mark Twain, Horace Porter, and Joseph H. Choate. The speeches of these men served as a most delightful source of entertainment. At the first meeting of the year, the chairman analyzed Mark Twain's "New England Weather." The humor and literary finish of that speech made the first program an interesting and fruitful source of deduction. The chairman was able by the excellence of his model, to bring before the members of the club the most important principles lying back of every good after-dinner speech. During the next month, speeches were outlined and analyzed with the purpose of studying the structure and the style of the best American post-prandial addresses. Near the end of the first semester, entire speeches were memorized and presented to the club.

The second half of the course was the test of the practicality of the work. I took great pains to select for the first speaker a boy who is exceptionally gifted in the appreciation of literature, who is a good speaker and who is a leader in the club. I told him to saturate himself with the spirit of Mark Twain. This he did. On the night that he delivered his response to the toast *Springfield, a city of homes* he literally "brought down the house." He had done just what I wanted—he had set a standard. The talk that night after the meeting closed was so enthusiastic and appreciative that I knew a successful future for the course was assured. All tried to surpass the standard set, and the result was that by June everyone of the twenty boys had delivered at least one creditable speech. Early in the

fall, I had suggested to the boys that the natural outcome of a study in after-dinner speaking would be a "real live banquet" at a "real live hotel." The suggestion naturally appealed to them, and so there was a saving of the funds of the society throughout the year in order to have the final meeting a banquet in every sense of the word. Accordingly, on the seventh of last June, an epoch-making event in the club life of the Technical High School, Springfield, took place at the Hotel Kimball. The speakers were well-prepared, delivering speeches that would be worthy of men in college; the setting was perfect; that night with high school boys and girls, oral composition of a distinctly social type had come into its own.

For the past four years, in accordance with the plan of many institutions, the Technical High School has offered a course to juniors in the short story. This course had, at first, as its reason for being, a double purpose (1) the reading of the world's best short stories, (2) the appreciation of those principles that would elevate the taste of the pupil in the selection of worthy magazines and short stories. This purpose, at the end of the first year, impressed the teachers of the English department as being somewhat narrow. The pupil aim was largely individual, not social. During the second year, therefore, the juniors were trained to retell the stories that most appealed to them. Class competition showed the teacher the pupils best fitted to entertain the freshman classes. With a team thus selected, the pupil-directors of the work planned a schedule that enabled the upper class students to give, in the most entertaining manner, either through a carefully prepared reading or a reproduction, stories which were considered suitable for freshmen. This had the desired effect; the older pupils began to see that reading and story-telling can serve as a very lively source of entertainment.

The enthusiasm last year for after-dinner speaking made the English department add to the program, about Christmas time, an additional course in story-telling.

Sara Cone Bryant's "How To Tell Stories To Children" was made the basis of the course, with supplementary reading from Shedlock's "The Art of the Story Teller" and Kready's "A Study of Fairy Tales." The girls immediately entered into the spirit of the work. Some, we found, were going to the normal school; some expected to enter library work; nearly all intended, after leaving high school, to cast their lot with children. To take away the atmosphere of the

classroom, the girls organized the Friday meetings of the English class into a story-telling club and chose a chairman whose duty it was to present the speakers, conduct the class criticisms, and review, from time to time, the principles developed in the analyses of the tales under discussion. Each girl was required to work up a repertoire, and each girl was expected to tell her story time and again so that she might live with the personages in the tales she retold. In addition to the narrating of many stories each girl was expected to read at least twenty others, and criticize and classify them according to their suitability for children of various ages.

By the middle of April, after about four months of earnest study and weekly practice, nearly every girl was ready to work with a group of children. Two fields for the use of our talent occurred to us: the assemblies of the junior high schools and the Saturday meetings in the children's department of the city library and its branches. The best seasoned story-teller was selected; and she made her first appearance before an assembly of five hundred junior high school boys and girls. Seumas MacManus's "Jack and the King who was a Gentleman" so interested the children that they demanded another story. Another was given. This assembly resulted in the beginning of a "season" for the story-teller. She was asked to entertain a nurses' club, the children at the library, and the members of various church clubs. Other girls had similar experiences and nearly all entertained the children at the meetings of the library story-telling sessions.

Thus more and more the English teachers of the Technical High School are beginning to feel that the spirit of club life and the spirit of all composition and literature work, whenever possible, must be social in nature. "Having an audience" is a stock phrase of everyone interested in making composition and literature vital. But may we not go a step further, and see if we cannot reach beyond the four walls of our schoolroom to find a broader field for our oral work? In activities similar to the banquets of the Forum Society, training for future effective speaking is given, and boys and girls are made to see that composition work can give real entertainment in the social affairs of life; in activities similar to those of the girls' story-telling club and the dramatic society, a whole community can be made to appreciate the enlivening qualities of a course in English composition and literature that aims for social service.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Mr. Webster's report is but one of the papers which, at our Boston meeting, presented the idea of improved speech. Miss Dawes of Quincy told of her interesting experiment of a Better English Week: Mr. Kenneth Beal told us how the teachers of the Mechanic Arts High School were trying to eliminate the common errors; Miss Madeline Driscoll of the Lewis School, Roxbury, gave a most practical talk on Oral Reading; Mr. Leonard B. Moulton showed how the principles of good speech could be worked out in business talks and in effective advertising. Mr. Willard of Watertown and Miss Phemister of Dorchester led the interesting discussion.

At the Springfield meeting, December 8, the general topic—The Use of Modern Literature in High-School Classes—was discussed in its various phases by Professor Richard Rice, Smith College; Mr. A. B. deMille, Milton Academy; Miss Frances L. Warner, Mount Holyoke College; Mr. Myron B. Williams, Hartford High School; and Mr. Ralph Boas, Central High School, Springfield.

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